

# Literary Hoaxes: An Eye-Opening History of Famous Frauds

## A Review

[Chip Smith](#)

by Melissa Katsoulis, Skyhorse Publishing, 328 pages, 2009.

When I was a kid, I looked forward to visiting my father on weekends. He would pick me up after school on Fridays, and we would usually head over to Shoney's or the local bowling alley where Dad would drink cup after cup of black coffee and entertain me with stories and reminiscences, mostly drawn from his early life in a rural Appalachian town. There were hunting stories and sports stories, but the ones I liked best were about trouble. My father's boyhood, I gathered or imagined, was a chronicle of dangerous and violent adventure. In rapt attention, I would listen as he told me about schoolyard fights and brushes with the dark forces of nature. "Were you scared?" I would ask at a pause. And he would assure me that yes, he was scared. But the fear gives way to a different energy. I wondered if I would ever understand.

Just as vividly, I remember the times when my father seemed distracted. Something in the news would have him rankled and the flow of nostalgic storytelling would be traded for a different stream of commentary – fulmination, really – over what he perceived to be the sorry state of world affairs. At such times, Dad would drum his fingers in restive spurts and on more occasions than I can recall, his tone would become ominous as he ventured to tell me about "the book."

"I never got my hands on a copy," he recalled. "I read about it years ago in a magazine – I think it was *Readers Digest* – in the waiting room at the doctor's office." The book, he went on to explain, was written in the 1920s by a "British Communist" and it provided an inside account of what could fairly be described as a far-flung cultural conspiracy. It outlined an intricate commie-directed plan whereby high-ranking media moguls and government moles were being covertly enlisted in an insidious plot to undermine the traditional foundations of Western civilization by injecting subversive ideas – notably about civil rights and women's liberation – into the susceptible minds of the hapless and ever-malleable masses. The idea, though my father never quite stated it in such terms, was to lull the proles into a state hypnotic complacency, ensuring that they would lie back and take it when the sickle came down.

Dad could never remember the name of the book, but when he mentioned it again recently, I decided to do some Googling. It didn't take long to discover that the "book" he had in mind was in fact nothing more than a half-formed hoax most likely concocted by the red-baiting anti-Semite, Eustace Mullins, who died earlier this year. Far from being a full-scale literary hoax, the story of the fabled tract – ostensibly entitled *A Racial Program for the Twentieth Century* – traced to a single quotation that was widely reported in the popular media after it was read by a Mississippi Congressman during a floor debate over the 1957 Civil Rights bill. Attributed to one "Israel Cohen" (please), who was indeed described as being a British Communist, the book was said to have been written in 1912 (not in the 1920s as my father recalled), fully eight years before the British Communist Party came into existence. When newspaper editors attempted to track down the source of the quotation, they were initially referred to a letter to the editor that had run in the *Washington Star*. A subsequent investigation soon hung the quote on Mr. Mullins, who claimed to have transcribed it from a Zionist text during his researches at the Library of Congress.

Needless to add, the primary source remained elusive for the simple reason that it never existed. Given enough time and initiative, perhaps Mullins would have drafted up a full-scale forgery (it wouldn't have been his first), but the bud was nipped just as the seed was sewn. While retractions and corrections were printed in course, people like my father would remember – and believe – only the story of a darkly prophetic book that detailed the occult machinations of forces most sinister.

While *A Racial Program for the Twentieth Century* goes unmentioned in Melissa Katsoulis' *Literary Hoaxes: An Eye-Opening History of Famous Frauds* (originally published in the UK under the more mischievously clever title, *Telling Tales*), she does provide an engaging account of the mystery and mystique surrounding the more infamous literary fabrication from which Eustace Mullins' aborted hoax was surely inspired, if not derived. In agreement with most scholars, Katsoulis suspects *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to have been the work of Pytor Ivanovich Rachovsky, a prominent counter-revolutionary member of the Russian secret police driven by nostalgia for the aristocratic order and "for whom the prospect of a Jewish rebellion was regarded as a real possibility." Rachovsky's imputed authorship of *The Protocols* was first conjectured (and arguably proven) in 1921 when *The Times* published a detailed expose by Philip Graves where it was argued that the old-guard loyalist had essentially clipped and pasted and plagiarized from obscure scraps to construct what has since become one of the most notoriously influential literary frauds in modern history. Katsoulis ends her brief study of the affair on a pensive and somewhat treacly note, wondering whether Rachovsky would "regret the end result of his hoax if he could have lived to see it acted on so terribly by Hitler and others? Or would he look upon the afterlife of his hoax with pride?" The sentiment behind Katsoulis' rhetorical question is understood, but it misses a more salient point about the attraction of literary hoaxes, especially those drawn out of political animus. Individual hoaxers are far less significant than the cultural milieu in which their inventions find traction.

Indeed, if Katsoulis' broader study of an important subject has an overarching weakness, it is that she consistently over-emphasizes the psychological portraiture of hoaxers, while downplaying the cultural context in which their fakes find such special resonance before, and often after, the debunking is done. Had I confronted my father with a detailed account of the story behind "the book" that never was, I'm sure he would have been incredulous, or perhaps indifferent. "No," he would have assured me, "this was a different book. I remember reading about it in a magazine – I think it was *Reader's Digest*..." Such is the nature of belief. When a story fills a void, there will always be an audience and truth be damned. If a bristly Russian reactionary hadn't penned *The Protocols of Zion*, another fabrication would have come forth to sate the demons in time.

Yet I don't want to be too hard on Katsoulis over the "rogues gallery" approach she adopts in chronicling select literary shenanigans. She pretends to no semiotic ambition, after all, and the strategy she employs has the merit of being entertaining. Katsoulis is nothing if not a raconteur, and the case studies on display are leavened with pith and good humor throughout. Despite a few cloying turns of phrase, her prose is generally crisp and lively. At her best, Katsoulis writes with a distinctive – though never distracting – British sensibility that at times assumes a wicked edge, as when she exposes the myriad frauds concocted by *Go Ask Alice* fraudster Beatrice Sparks. Moreover, her approach is particularly well-suited to the form of popular debunking, and by placing personalities front and center, an interesting point arises more often than not. With inevitable exceptions (Konrad Kajau's fabrication of the *The Hitler Diaries* being perhaps most conspicuous), most of the hoaxers that Katsoulis profiles appear not to have acted out of purely venal motives – at least not initially. More common are dilettantes and misfits who

seem driven by a kind of misguided wish fulfillment. Others are motivated by personal enmity or a longing for acceptance. Some are mere tricksters, often with an axe to grind. And others, such as the “emotionally fragile” fake Holocaust memoirist Benjamin Wilkomirski (to whom we shall turn shortly) seem to have been genuinely deluded.

Katsoulis’ survey is sprawling and, as she admits in her introduction, in no way comprehensive (hoax buffs will keep a running list of omissions). Her focus shifts breezily from Native American pretenders (perhaps epitomized by the career of Archie Belaney, a.k.a. “Grey Owl” whose false persona played so well with the nascent environmentalist movement) to invariably race-preoccupied Australian hoaxes, to phony war stories and mafia memoirs, to classic Shakespeare forgeries, celebrity memoirs, “misery memoirs” (where the James Frey fiasco looms large, even if Katsoulis is remiss not to mention John Dolan’s prescient debunking), and, of necessity, to hoaxes in the key of religion (a subject frankly too vast for the hit-and-run treatment accorded by Katsoulis).

Banking off the work of the American hoaxologist Brian McHale, Katsoulis’ loose patchwork is held together under a somewhat fuzzy and arguably superfluous typology that slots literary hoaxes into three (always three!) broad and occasionally overlapping categories. These are: 1. the “genuine hoax” (“dishonest literary creations which are intended never to be exposed,”), 2. the “entrapment hoax” (intended “to lure a particular academic, publisher, or literary community with a prank text”), and 3. the “mock hoax” (“in which a genuinely experimental writer plays conscious tricks with the very notion of authorship to create a voice which is neither quite theirs nor someone else’s”).

While “genuine hoaxes” receive primacy of attention, it is interesting to observe where even here the lines may blur, as Katsoulis implicitly acknowledges in her treatment of the works once attributed the precocious literary dynamo who was introduced to the literati as “J.T. LeRoy.” LeRoy was a preposterously conceived character, ostensibly bred and abused in the West Virginia coal fields only to become a cross-dressing truck stop whore with a heart of gold. When I picked up “his” first memoir-novel, *Sarah*, I immediately smelled a rat, but I knew just the same that it was a playful rat. So when it was revealed that LeRoy was in fact the literary alter-ego of a marginally known indie musician named Laura Albert, I wasn’t in the least surprised. The joke, if it can be considered a joke, was on the established literary class who bought into the tripped-out Dorothy Allison mystique with such wishful credulity. Even if the affair – which ultimately entailed litigation – is generally ascribed the status of a “genuine hoax,” I think there’s something more than face-saving to Albert’s steadfast defense that the LeRoy persona was better understood as “a veil,” which is to say, a “mock hoax,” perhaps with shades of entrapment. Discuss.

When, to her credit, Katsoulis turns her attention to the discomfiting subject of fake Holocaust memoirs (“genuine” hoaxes all, at least for now), the limitations of her personality-centered approach become more apparent. While her discussion of three indisputable fakers – Benjamin Wilkomirski, Misha Levy Defonseca, and Herman Rosenblat (curiously, the case of Jerzey Kosinski goes unmentioned) – comes laced with obligatory expressions of naval-gazing indignation that any sane person could concoct tales appropriating the “massively emotive signifier of Nazism,” it should be obvious to anyone paying attention that the horrorshow backdrop of established Holocaust historiography provides fertile ground for the confabulations, fantasies, and lurid tales that, from the beginning, have attached. The motifs are well-established, the thematic terrain arable, and the Manichean forces at the center of the bleak narrative set the perfect template for direful meditation and moral edification, however sentimental or

rarefied the phrasing. And of course, there must be an audience, clamoring for more. It really is no coincidence that Katsoulis' star satanic abuse prevaricator – one Laurel Rose Wilson, a.k.a. “Laura Grabowski” – doubled-teamed as an Auschwitz survivor (and Mengele torture subject, no less) and even corresponded with dour old Wilkomirski, her fantasy chum from darker days.

Rare is the literary hoax that doesn't collapse under rudimentary scrutiny, and phony Holocaust memoirs are no different. It just takes a little longer for word to get out, and it probably helps when the hoaxers turn out not to be Jewish (as was the case with two out of three of the H-fakers profiled in *Literary Hoaxes*). In Wilkomirski's case, the edifice of his childhood memoir *Fragments* began to crumble soon after a sleuthing skeptic wrote up a carefully researched exposé in the Swiss magazine, *Weltwoche*, revealing the aging fantasist's true identity as an orphaned Christian named Bruno Grosjean, who, it seemed reasonable to speculate, had simply projected his own unhappy childhood memories onto the Grand Guignol of the Twentieth Century. And if the maudlin tropes involving savior wolves and apple tossing love gestures weren't enough to sew doubt in the cases of Defonseca and Rosenblat, lupine behaviorists and camp geographers were on hand to lay their trite vagaries to dust.

Of course, Katsoulis disdains to entertain the possibility that phony the Holocaust memoir genre may have deeper roots than such notoriously dethroned examples permit us to consider. With reference to the only slightly more sophisticated yarns spun by the “acknowledged stars of Holocaust memoir” such as Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, she proffers nary an ort of qualified skepticism. Nor does she acknowledge that Holocaust revisionists have long deployed the same veridical tools and critical methods favored by less odious debunkers to expose serious flaws and discrepancies in the works of the most celebrated and memorialized Holocaust memoirists, including that truly tragic figure, Anne Frank. In my view, revisionists – beginning with Robert Faurisson – have compiled a compelling dossier suggesting that the world-famous “Diary of a Young Girl” was posthumously embellished with such ingenuity and to such extent as to constitute a wholesale fraud. Yet Katsoulis doesn't go there. She doesn't even acknowledge that a dispute exists, relevant as the point should be. To do so would be to enter the mind of a Christian apologist who sets out to examine the Apocrypha only to end up questioning the entire Canon.

The distinction between Holocaust historiography and Holocaust literature has long been guarded by scholars and cultural gatekeepers, much as the distinction is increasingly demarcated between the fake Holocaust memoirs that draw scandalous headlines and embarrass Oprah and the presumably legitimate ones whose essential veracity good people are obliged not to question. In truth, such distinctions have never held up well under examination. The uniquely atrocious elements of the standard history trace to germinal rumors which, in turn, served to fertilize a culture of anxiously wrought storytelling. The historians came later to supply a formal foundation to an already-emergent narrative. They ran with the stories in currency, and strived to make the pieces fit into place. Efforts to disentangle the resulting knots are thus complicated, in part by overconfidence, in part by a very human temptation to gloss and retrofit disparate scraps to better suit a prevailing narrative. Caught in the mire, false witnesses simply emote on cue.

Near the conclusion of his magnum opus, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, esteemed Holocaust historiographer Raul Hilberg interprets the administrative system of Nazi genocide in terms that tempt metaphysical despair, arguing that the “conveyer belt” by which human exterminations were carried out arose out of a kind of brute teleology, the culmination of which took “millennia in the development of

Western Culture.” Hilberg assures readers that “the Jewish crowds which surged into the gas chambers were incapable of fighting back.” Conditioned as they were by two thousand years of fabled history, “they had deliberately unlearned the art of revolt.” Thus they trembled in fateful obedience before the whip-wielding executioners that live on – and to some degree originated – in the minds of fanciful Holocaust memoirists. While Hilberg’s editorial reflections may be read to depict a uniquely horrific crisis of modernism, it is difficult to escape the quasi-mythic fundament upon which his dire pronouncement is situated. The Holocaust story simply cannot be dislodged from its theodical moorings. It resonates as a Job-like tale of divinely ordained suffering, just as an audience demanded. Memoirists are wise to the form, while otherwise careful scholars are too often rendered stupid by the mythic penumbra. This is how lines are blurred.

Considered against the taboo-enshrouded mythos that accredited historians have done their part to establish as verity, the transparently fraudulent works of the troubled Holocaust memoirists profiled by Katsoulis are neither exceptional nor aberrant; their tales simply follow the line already cast into darkness unbound. And they work, perhaps too clumsily, within a narrative framework that guarantees a receptive readership. There is no cause for soul-searching here. Nor are there grounds for apology, such as that which Katsoulis tacitly extends on behalf of Wilkomirski when she observes that his discredited memoir is imbued with “an overwhelming feeling of young Benjamin’s powerlessness at the hands of the adult forces ... who have total control over his fate.” Wilkomirski’s sense of childlike vertigo before implacable forces is entirely consonant with the meta-mythic *idée fixe* evinced in the explanatory reflections proffered by Hilberg, the real historian. The literary *modus operandi* is par for the course. A genre device.

Shielded by volumes of hagiographic portraiture, Elie Wiesel’s neo-midrashic fables have largely escaped the scrutiny of would-be debunkers (revisionists notwithstanding). It will be interesting to see whether the old sage retains his halo if the conjectures of some tenacious revisionists pan out and he turns out to have trespassed beyond the bounds of conventionally excusable embellishment. To the extent that his oeuvre has been interpreted critically to date, criticism has typically taken the form of careful apologetics couched to remove Holocaust literature from the purview of creeping revisionism. Yet it is perhaps telling that the famed misery memoirist has occasionally invoked laconically parsed qualifications in defense of the essential truth of storytelling that lives at necessary tension with objective reality. “No witness is capable of recounting everything from start to finish anyway,” Wiesel wrote in his memoir *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, “God alone knows the whole story.” In other contexts, Katsoulis refers to this stance as “pleading an alternative truth,” and as plea bargains go, it’s a decent gambit. Trouble is, it just as easily provides a convenient cover for bullshit. Anyway, Wilkomirski says something similar these days. We shouldn’t read too much into these things.

In an underappreciated essay entitled “Wilkomirski and What it Means,” the maligned American revisionist Arthur Butz poses a question that presses neatly against the matter. “Does our dispute with the defenders of the entrenched legend arise not over what happened” Butz asks, “but over what it means for something to ‘happen’? Is the dispute metaphysical rather than historical? Or is it neither?”

As cherished distinctions between fact, fiction and fraud converge and collapse as they must, and as lines are drawn and revised perforce, I believe that Butz’s epistemological query will assume greater relevance. If the marginal sideshow of Holo-hoaxery presented by Katsoulis spills into more hallowed ground, a postmodern impasse seems inevitable.

It may even be necessary to invent a fourth category.

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<b>Title:</b>	Literary Hoaxes: An Eye-Opening History of Famous Frauds
<b>Sources:</b>	<i>Inconvenient History</i> , 2(2) (2010)
<b>Dates:</b>	published: 2010-07-01, first posted: 2014-02-14 00:00:00

<http://inconvenienthistory.com/2/2/3115>